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FORUM

Alan Dundes

The Motif-Index and the Tale Type Index: A Critique

It must be said at the outset that the six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* and the Aarne-Thompson tale type index constitute two of the most valuable tools in the professional folklorist's arsenal of aids for analysis. This is so regardless of any legitimate criticisms of these two remarkable indices, the use of which serves to distinguish scholarly studies of folk narrative from those carried out by a host of amateurs and dilettantes. The identification of folk narratives through motif and/or tale type numbers has become an international *sine qua non* among bona fide folklorists. For this reason, the academic folklore community has reason to remain eternally grateful to Antti Aarne (1867–1925) and Stith Thompson (1885–1976) who twice revised Aarne's original 1910 *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*—in 1928 and in 1961—and who compiled two editions of the *Motif-Index* (1922–1936; 1955–1958).

There has been considerable discussion of the concepts of motif and tale type. Highlights of the motif literature include Bødker 1965:201–202; Meletinski 1977; Ben-Amos 1980; Courtes 1982; Bremond 1982; and Würzbach 1993. Representative views of the tale type may be found in Honti 1939; Greverus 1964; Jason 1972; and Georges 1983. Thompson defined the motif as "the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition" (1946:415; 1950b:1137).

Perhaps the most lucid delineation of the concept of tale type was made by the brilliant Hungarian folklorist János Honti. In his 1937 essay in *Folk-liv,* Honti proposed three different ways of considering a tale type as a viable unit of analysis. First, it consisted of a specific binding together of motifs; second, any one tale type could stand as a unique entity in contrast with other tale types, e.g., Cinderella is not the same story-plot as Little Red Riding Hood; and third, a tale type could be perceived as a kind of cookie-cutter Platonic form or model which manifested itself through multiple existence (such multiple instances being termed versions or variants). In an extended essay on "The Tale—Its World," Honti makes it perfectly clear that he understands that "the concept of 'type' is merely an ideal construction." But by the same token, Honti does not recognize the genuine utility of the

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concept: " . . . for the researcher, behind all these variants, only one 'type' exists . . . and therefore scholarship is entitled to construct a conceptual unity, considering the variants as constantly changing phenomena of an unchanging process" (1975:35). Although Honti employs the term "variants," his definition to type seems eminently sane. It should be kept in mind, however, that a tale type is a *composite* plot synopsis corresponding in exact verbatim detail to no one individual version but at the same time encompassing to some extent *all* of the extant versions of that folktale.

There have been at least two major criticisms of the concepts of motif and tale type to date. The first, articulated most effectively by Scandinavian folklorists, concerns the alleged "independence" of the units. Anna Birgitta Rooth in a "Digression" entitled "The Tale as Composition," appended to her classic dissertation on Cinderella (1951:237–40), suggested that individual motifs were more often than not found to be interdependent upon other motifs in a given tale, and she proposed the notion of "motif-complex" to describe such tradition collocations of motifs. Similarly, Bengt Holbek argued that standard Aarne-Thompson tale typology "does violence" to the actual material collected in the field insofar as so-called types were often combined (1964:160). Yet despite his lifelong reservations about the concept of tale type: "It is not very clear," Holbek did reluctantly admit that "types *do* exist to some extent" (1987:157, 158). It is certainly true that inasmuch as the magic tale (AT 300–749) typically ends with marriage—according to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1988:63–64)—AT 480, The Spinning-Women by the Spring. The Kind and the Unkind Girls, which does *not* end with a marriage, frequently serves as the introduction to another tale type that *does* end with a marriage, e.g. AT 510A Cinderella (Roberts 1994:102).

The second criticism has to do with the alleged Eurocentrism of the concepts of motif and tale type. The argument in a nutshell is that these concepts were developed from a European data corpus and hence may not be applicable to nonwestern material, e.g., African folk narrative (Finnegan 1970:327–28). The idea in part stems from the correct observation that African storytellers in general favor improvisation more than do European storytellers and that this penchant for improvisation makes the notions of fixed motifs and tale types superfluous and irrelevant. The empirical evidence, however, would disprove this largely anti-European, anti-colonist ideological position insofar as there do seem to be identifiable African narrative motifs and stable traditional tale types (cf. Dundes 1977 and especially Bascom 1992).

Three other criticisms of the motif and the tale type might conveniently be grouped under the rubrics of 1) Overlapping, 2) Censorship, and 3) Ghost Entries. Thompson recognized the fuzziness and vagueness of his definitions of motif and tale type, but he actually went so far as to defend

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such definitions because supposedly they avoided "long debates" (cf. Dundes 1964:54). Thompson admitted that "somewhat more than half of the types" in the tale type index "consist of a single narrative motif" (1946:417, 439). This means that to a large extent the motif and tale type systems are overlapping. The vast majority of animal tales (AT 1–299) are *both* single tale type numbers and single motif numbers. The same holds true for "Tales of the Stupid Ogre" (AT 2009–2430) among others. So then what is the essential difference, if any, between a motif and a tale type? In these instances, virtually none. The distinction becomes more meaningful in more complex tales, e.g., "Tales of Magic" (AT 300–729) which consist of sequences of numerous motifs rather than just one. One of the key differences between a motif and a tale type is that all versions of a tale type are assumed to be genetically related, that is, they are assumed to be cognate, whereas all narratives listed under a motif heading may or may not be related. Any account of the origin of the sun, for example, could be listed under motif A710, Creation of the Sun. To be fair, Thompson himself was well aware of this distinction (1946:415–16; 1950a:753).

The problem of "overlapping" goes far beyond the confusion of motif and tale type in so many narratives. It occurs within *both* the conceptualization of motifs and tale types. In defining motifs, Thompson claims they fall in to three classes: actors, items, and incidents (1946:415–16). (It is the latter category of "incidents" that overlaps with tale types.) The obvious difficulty is: how can there possibly be an "incident" motif that does not include either an "actor" motif or an "item" motif? The categories of motifs delineated by Thompson are thus not at all mutually exclusive and in fact are unavoidably overlapping.

Tale types are also overlapping although this problem was caused by Aarne's original classification scheme and cannot be blamed on Thompson. Aarne elected—in retrospect unwisely—to classify folktales partly on the basis of dramatis personae. Thus his first section consisted of animal tales (AT 1–299) in which the principal actors in the tales were animal characters. (For the inconsistencies even within Aarne's animal categories, see von Sydow 1948.) Aarne's mistake was not classifying tales on the basis of narrative plot rather than the dramatis personae. The reality of folktales, for example, demonstrates that the same tale can be told with either animal or human characters. As a result of Aarne's mistake, we often find the very same tale, that is, tale type in the true genetic sense, listed twice in the Aarne-Thompson index under two separate numbers. Thompson tried his best to alleviate the problem through a system of cross-referencing, but the fundamental theoretical issue was not really resolved. A substantial number of animal tales, for example, are clearly also tales involving ogres or numskulls. AT 9B In the Division of the Crop the Fox Takes the Corn = AT 1030 The Crop Division. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp pointed out this obvious

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overlap in 1928 (1968:5–6). In similar fashion, AT 43 = AT 1097; AT 121 = AT 1250; AT 123 = AT 333; AT 126 = AT 1149, etc. The point is that the same tale should not have two or more different tale type numbers! So we can see that in some instances, motifs overlap with tale types, and in others, tale types overlap with other tale types. Such overlapping surely suggests that both the current motif and tale type systems are flawed.

Another serious problem with both the motif and tale type indices involves the recurring issue of censorship. Thompson indulged in what can only be described as absurd and excessive prudery. To the extent that folkloristics is a science, albeit a social science, it cannot or should not be victimized by self-imposed censorship. This is especially grievous in the case of folkloristic data because so much of folklore deals with unabashedly taboo topics. In that context, a decision by a scholar to omit "obscene" data from standard collections and indices is inexcusable. Thompson states his philosophy with respect to such motifs in an obscure footnote in the *Motif-Index* (1957:514, n. 1): "Thousands of obscene motifs in which there is no point except the obscenity itself might logically come at this point, but they are entirely beyond the scope of this present work. . . . In view of the possibility that it might become desirable to classify these motifs and place them within the present index, space has been left from X700 to X749 for such motifs." One cannot possibly help but wonder at Thompson's skewed logic in leaving only fifty numerical slots for "thousands of obscene motifs." (For an incisive critique of Thompson's prudery, see Legman's 1962 essay "Toward A Motif-Index of Erotic Humor.") So obscene folklore motifs were simply intentionally omitted by Thompson in the *Motif-Index*. A slightly different strategy was employed in the tale type index. In this index, Thompson does assign numbers to some obscene tales, but his accompanying verbal synopsis is either too brief to be of much use or is absent altogether. Two examples should suffice. AT 1420G Anser Venalis (Goose as Gift) is followed by the following oblique sentence: "The lover regains his gift by a ruse (obscene)." This is not a very informative synopsis. What *is* the ruse? (For a version of this tale, see Afanasyev 1966:56–57, 268–69). Even worse is Thompson's listing of AT 1355*. Here the number is followed only by "(obscene)," which tells us absolutely nothing whatsoever about the content of the tale. Why even bother to include such a useless entry? (For a possible version of this tale, see Afanasyev 1966:183–84.) This sort of conscious omission of "obscene" folklore from the tale type and motif indices surely impairs the utility of these otherwise helpful scholarly aids.

Finally, a problem which is more of an annoyance is what might by termed "ghost entries." Now it must be understood that in a mammoth compilation of the scope of the indices under discussion, it is quite understandable that typographical errors or occasional omissions are bound to occur. Thompson did, after all, carry out his enormous labors in the pre-computer era.

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Still, such errors can be frustrating to would-be users of the indices. There is no point in listing all such errata, but several examples may illustrate the problem. Thompson's bibliographical code of signalling monographic studies of a particular tale type with a double asterisk prefix as opposed to mere lists of versions by a single asterisk is employed throughout the Aarne-Thompson tale type index, but is never explained. The explanation is, however, to be found in the introduction to the *Motif-Index* (1955:23) where the same system is utilized.

Many of the errors are minor. For instance, under motif B31.1 Roc. A giant bird which carries men off in its claws, we find a cross-reference to K186.1.1, Hero sewed up in an animal hide so as to be carried to height by bird. But inspection reveals that there is no such motif as K186.1.1! There is, however, motif K1861.1 which is the correct motif. It is just a typographical error involving a mere decimal point, but it could prove terribly frustrating to even an experienced user of the *Motif-Index.* In volume 6, the index volume of the *Motif-Index,* under the entry "Book" we find the last reference to be "value to b. depends on appreciation of it through J1061.5." In the relevant J section, we find J1061.1 through J1061.4, but no J1061.5.! In the same volume 6 under the entry "Shadow," we find "undesired lover asked not to step on s. K1277.6." A quick check shows that there is no motif K1277 at all. Similar discrepancies occur in the tale type index. Under AT 74C Rabbit Throws Coconut, we find "Cf. Type 22." But there is no tale type 22! After AT 1510 The Matron of Ephesus, we find "Cf. Type 1752" but there is no such tale type listed. These sorts of errors could be corrected in future editions of these indices.

Less easy to correct is one last basic theoretical deficiency to be found in the tale type index. Whereas the *Motif-Index* offers worldwide coverage of folk narrative, the tale type index does not. According to Thompson's introduction, "the folktales of all the world" are *not* considered in the index. Rather, it is only the Indo-European folktale which is the acknowledged delimited corpus covered. In Thompson's own words, "Strictly then, this work might by called 'The Types of The Folk-Tale of Europe, West Asia, and the Lands Settled by These Peoples'" (Aarne and Thompson 1961:7). By definition, then, native American tale types and African tale types, among other nonwestern narratives, are intentionally excluded. The problem is that some of the tales presently included in the tale type index are *not* Indo-European tales at all, but rather are incontrovertibly native American or African tale types! Two examples may suffice to illustrate this claim. AT 297A, Turtles' War Party, is a classic native American tale type (cf. Dundes 1978). It is *not* found in the Indo-European narrative tradition at all. Its occurrence in Japan alone was apparently the basis for its inclusion in the AT index. Taking Thompson's introduction to the index at face value, an unwary index user might wrongly assume that the native Americans bor-

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rowed it from the Indo-European corpus, but this is not the case. AT tale type 291 Deceptive Tug-of-war, is an equally classic *African* tale type. It is *not* found in the Indo-European corpus except for one lone text reported in Peru. Again, it is evidently this single Peruvian text that decided Thompson to include it in his 1961 revision of the Aarne index. (For references to sixty-one African versions of this tale, see Paulme and Bremond 1980.) Again, the naive user of the index might wrongly conclude that all of the many versions in Africa and in the African diaspora had been borrowed from the Indo-European tradition, but this is not the case. One day when there are comprehensive published tale type indices for *all* African tale types and for *all* native (North and South) American tale types, such errors will be easier to correct.

The overlapping difficulties of the motif and tale type indices aside, the unfortunate omission of obscene folk narrative notwithstanding, and overlooking or ignoring the ghost references and the misleading inclusion of native American and African tale types in the AT index, the fact remains that the motif and tale type indices with all their faults remain indispensable for the identification of traditional folk narratives. Since identification is a necessary prerequisite for interpretation, we folklorists simply cannot do without these standard indices. Moreover, the individual tale type indices for particular cultures or countries (cf. Assolina 1987) can serve as field guides or "finding lists" for prospective fieldworkers. Imperfect though they may be, they represent the keystones for the comparative method in folkloristics, a method which despite postmodernist naysayers and other prophets of gloom continues to be the hallmark of international folkloristics.

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